

Plaza Fire House  
126 Plaza Street  
Los Angeles, Los Angeles County  
California

HABS No. CAL-338

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction  
1000 Geary Street  
San Francisco, California

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PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT  
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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PLAZA FIRE HOUSE

Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California

ADDRESS: 126 Plaza Street  
OWNER: State of California  
OCCUPANT: Los Angeles City Fire Department  
USE: Fire Department Museum

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

This is the oldest standing fire house in Los Angeles (built 1884), and the second to be built by the City. Significant for interpretation of the mode of fire protection during the late 19th Century. It is California Registered Landmark #730.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

From the minutes of the Los Angeles City Council for March of 1884, comes the notation that bids were to be accepted for the construction of a fire house fronting on the Plaza. Subsequently, notices appear to the effect that W. A. Boring, a local architect, had been awarded the commission. Actual construction began on June 16, 1884, and by the following September, the building was completed. Unfortunately, the extant newspapers of the day note only in passing that such a building was either under construction or about to be opened.

The engine house was of brick, with a balcony and a small cupola for a fire bell on the facade. A cornice of corbeled brick arches in the Romanesque style, the balcony and the cupola, were the only decorative

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features of the otherwise plain front. At the right, a small door opens from the street to a stairway to the second story quarters, and a large set of double doors opens into the station itself. The large room which housed the engine had wood flooring with a turn-table arrangement to avoid having to back the horses and fire wagon into the building.

At the rear of this room was a stable area with the hayloft between the first and second floors - the flooring upstairs having been raised several feet to accomodate this feature. Over the hayloft were three bedrooms, a water closet, and a small storage closet. A large room over the engine room served as a meeting place and recreation room for the volunteer fire department.

The architect followed closely examples of fire station construction of the day; particularly those in use in the East. This is particularly noticeable in having the horses quartered in the building with the men. In colder climates it was necessary to keep the horses warm, but in Southern California they probably would have been happier outside. Consequently, the station and the "fire laddies" tended to smell rather "horsey". However, the plans must have been considered adequate, for they were later repeated in an identical structure constructed of wood rather than brick.

The first occupants of the new building was volunteer 38's Engine Company No. 1 - so named because its roster numbered just thirty-eight men. This group remained until 1887 when they removed to the east side of town.

They were followed by the Walter S. Moore Engine Company No. 4, being named in honor of the first paid chief of the Los Angeles City Fire Department. Three years later Company No. 4 moved to new quarters around the corner from the old station, and next door to the Merced Theater.

The building appears to have been vacant from 1890 until 1892 when Chemical Company No. 1 moved in, and remained at this location until October 1, 1897. At this date the building ceased to be used in the capacity of a fire house.

Between 1897 and 1950 very little is known of its various tenants. From a photograph in the collection of the Los Angeles Public Library,

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dated "about 1920", we know that the upper story was known as the Hotel Espanol and the lower floor housed the Locatuen Cigar Store. According to large letters on the Los Angeles Street side of the building, The Cosmopolitan Saloon also occupied some space in the building as well. At this time, the large center doors were filled in and numerous additional windows and a door appeared on the side of the building. By the late 1940's the hotel had degenerated into a flop house, and the ground floor was in use as a warehouse and drug store.

Sometime after 1897, the northeast corner was damaged by fire, but fortunately not enough to warrant the building's demolition. However, it may have damaged the cupola, as the supports of the structure, which have survived, were badly charred. Another story has it that the wind blew the little structure off. The bell has completely disappeared.

By 1950, when the State of California purchased the building, the physical structure was in a serious state of disintegration. Externally, the four brick walls were intact, as was the balcony (somewhat remodeled), the projecting supports of the belfry, and the hoist beam for the hayloft.

What had once been the large front door (as earlier noted had been filled in with brick), had been partially opened for a large plate glass window, and the entrance was moved to the corner. Here the wall had been removed and the doorway angled across the open area with a column to support the corner of the building.

Restoration and repair turned up such items as the large iron door hinges - two still bolted to the wall - and a third in a pile of debris under the stairwell. Chinese lottery tickets were found in profusion all over the lower floor. Removal of linoleum on the second floor revealed the oval hole where the fire pole had been; and above the false ceiling on the lower floor, the remnants of the earlier ceiling came to light.

"Used" items from the Los Angeles Fire Department were incorporated in the restoration work where original work was missing. In the second floor recreation room the Douglas chairs and two circular tables were brought from storage - although still in excellent condition, they had long since been removed from use as they were "old fashioned". Hardware, as well as several doors came from the

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recently demolished Westminster Hotel. Even the brass pole had seen service in several other fire houses and had been retired before coming to the Plaza Fire House.

The building houses two ancient fire trucks - both of which saw service in the City of Los Angeles. The smaller is on display because of its age, and does not have a connection with the fire house itself. The larger of the two had not seen service in this particular fire house, but was in use during the era of the building's active use as a fire station.

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Interviews with:

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Capt. Robert N. Foster, Historian, Los Angeles Fire Dept.

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May 5, 1884

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July 15, 22, 1884

September 16, 1884

Prepared by,

*J. Thomas Owen*  
J. Thomas Owen, History Section  
Los Angeles Central Library

## ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The Fire House has been restored by the State Division of Architecture, and has followed as accurately as possible the original known conditions based upon old photographs, records, publications and "reading the walls" of the structure as the work progressed. Much of the material used for restoration came from other old buildings of the approximate same period.

Measured architectural and structural drawings were made of the existing conditions found prior to restoration by Burnett C. Turner, architect for the Pueblo de Los Angeles State Historical Monument. These drawings and an accompanying report to "establish the present conditions, stability and usefulness" of the building were dated June 13, 1957, and served as a guide for the subsequent work.

## EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions: 60'-7" (longest wall) x 27'-11 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (widest wall at north), with a second floor balcony on the main north front of 4'-2" x 11'-0".

Wall Construction: The original unreinforced brick bearing walls on the east and west sides have been strengthened for seismic forces by letting-in reinforced concrete columns at 8'-0" cc. (concealed in the wall) that tie to new concrete bond beams under the ground floor and into similar beams within the second floor and attic, thus making a structural box grid frame in the lateral axis. The original brick walls are 1'-1" thick.

Porches: At the second floor north wall there is a wood framed balcony with wood floor and milled decorative corner posts, wood panel railing between vertical rail posts of arched double stick units (four bays); a simple shed roof of 2x4 rafters and shingle roofing.

Chimney: The heating source in the Fire House was an iron pot-belly stove with round metal duct flue running horizontally to an opening in the brick chimney stack which projects about 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ " from the east wall into the interior. Openings were found at both the first and second floor; one old stove is presently located on the first floor.

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Doorways and Doors: The principal opening is located on the main north wall and is segmental arched brick lintel, which is typical for all exterior openings, in which the "apparatus door" (originally used for the charging horse-drawn firewagons) has been restored. It is reconstructed of stock Douglas Fir stiles and rails, with solid T&G Douglas Fir planks layed in vertical and diagonal panels with a small rectangular glass light set in each bi-folding leaf of a pair of doors. A similar door without glass has been rebuilt at the south wall of the horse stalls located at the opposite end of the ground floor. A single rebuilt door similar in design, but with a transom is adjacent to the north "apparatus door" at the street front.

Windows: Many are original, and are tall narrowly proportioned double-hung sash with redwood finish frames and trim, having typical segmental arched brick lintels. Rebuilt work of softwood matches original.

Roof: Three-panel Howe type trusses at 32" c.c. with parallel top and bottom chords made of 2x4 and 2x6 main members and 1 x \_ struts, with intermediate ceiling joists of 2x6s at 16" c.c. Each truss diminishes in height from the north wall (spanning laterally) approximately 4'-6" down to 3'-0" in height at the south wall. The original 1x12 straight layed sheathing has been replaced with a plywood diaphragm over which is a composition rolled roofing with gravel finish.

Cornice: Of corbeled brick arches in the Romanesque style with a center raised section on the north wall; the east and west side walls have a four step parapet; all walls are capped with a continuous brick coping.

Miscellaneous: The most unique feature on the exterior is a restored wood framed, shingled, rectangular, truncated cupola rising to a peak located at the north wall, overhanging the parapet and supported on two decorative wood brackets. This originally covered the fire alarm bell, now lost. A brick paved walk around the north and east elevations, using old material from neighboring buildings, has been started.

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## INTERIOR

Floor Plan: A right-angled trapazoidal form with the long axis oriented to the north-south direction, facing the Old Plaza; the non-parallel longest side fronts Los Angeles Street.

The ground floor consists of a main "engine" room with the restored turntable at the original location (a drain from the shallow brick pit under the turntable leads to the exterior) and four horse stalls to the rear at the south end. The latter originally led to a storage shed beyond. A wood stairway along the west wall leads to the second floor. A brass slide pole brought from another old fire station and set in the original hexagonally framed opening is in the northwest corner of the engine room.

On the second floor a large room of approximately 24' x 38', which was once used for social gatherings of the volunteer firemen, is now a display room and opens from the stairway. At the south end a stairway of five steps leads to a raised area with five rooms divided by a 4'-6" hall. On the east is a small room now used for displays and opposite is a small storage room and toilet with a skylight overhead. At the end of the hall are two sleeping rooms which meet at an angle.

Below these rooms at a mezzanine level is the old hayloft which once opened into the storage shed. The loft is directly over the ground floor horse stalls. There was once an opening in the southwest corner of the floor for a stairway down to the horse stalls.

Flooring: 2x6 T&G Douglas Fir planks (over an old concrete slab on the ground floor - not original) installed with square-headed nails matching original; the hayloft has 2x6 T&G, which is exposed from the horse stalls below, over 2x6 joists at 24" c.c. supported by new 6x6 posts; the horse stalls have a slightly raised plank flooring. The second floor has been restored with 1x6 T&G over a 5/8" plywood diaphragm on 2x13 joists, some of which are original. The raised sleeping area is similar except on 2x6 joists.



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Walls: New interior plaster over brick is typical; the horse stall area has exposed brick with a white paint. Other walls have vertical 1x6 T&G center bead paneling which is used as a finish for wainscots and stair railing as well. The sleeping area partitions are of similar material of one board in thickness with a center 2x3 horizontal brace and set in wood plates, top and bottom.

Ceilings: New plaster on gypsum lath over wood joists is typical except the hayloft which has exposed wood.

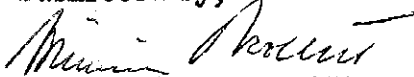
Doorways and Doors: Finish softwood framed openings with applied stops. Doors are generally rebuilt or reused old material of stock softwood paneling.

Trim: An original Douglas Fir wood 10" base has been restored and is typical throughout. Mouldings, casings, etc., are softwood, the original window material was redwood.

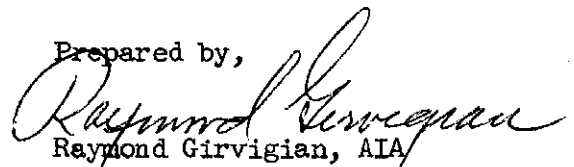
Hardware: In general, reused original hardware or units replaced from other old buildings of similar type have been employed.

Miscellaneous: The harness lift unit and the old original alarm board at the ground floor engine room are notable features. The original specifications provided for "Zanes" patented pre-fabricated water closet but the replacement is of a different early make.

Submitted by,

  
William Woollett, AIA  
AIA Preservation Committee

Prepared by,

  
Raymond Girvigian, AIA  
Preservation Officer  
Southern California Chapter, AIA

September 1963

APPROVED:

Charles S. Pope  
Charles S. Pope, AIA  
Supervising Architect, Historic Structures  
Western Office, Design and Construction  
National Park Service

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